

A 1980's View
The Coal Miners'
General Strike of 1949-50
and the
Birth of Marxist-Humanism
in the U.S.

A Missing Page from American Labor History
by Andy Phillips

The Emergence of a New Movement from
Practice that Is Itself a Form of Theory
by Raya Dunayevskaya

Price: \$2.00



Hearse and family survivors wait, above, for bodies of 56 miners killed in gas explosion in May 1942 at Osage mine in Scott's Run, West Virginia. Two months later, in July, Pursglove Mine, below, less than a mile away, exploded and claimed 20 more miners.



Dedication

Dedicated to the memory of Charles Denby (1907-1983), who, as a Black auto production worker in Detroit, created deep bonds of working class solidarity with the miners in West Virginia during their historic 1949-50 General Strike; and who helped to create the only Marxist-Humanist paper in the U.S., *News & Letters*, whose editor he became in 1955 when the first issue appeared in honor of the June 17, 1953 East German workers' revolt against Russian totalitarianism. It is for this reason that we have chosen June 17, 1984 as the publication date of this pamphlet.

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PREFACE

Today, when Automation has been spelled out as Robotics and the economy is in total crisis, it becomes imperative that the story of the great 1949-50 Miners' General Strike finally be told in the words of the participants themselves. This is not only because the full story of one of the most important events in American labor history has never been recorded outside of the narrow official records, that is, from the top — but because it is crucial to grasp this historic struggle as signalling both the opposition of the workers to the *new stage of production*, which had taken the form of the continuous miner, and the opening of a whole *new stage of cognition* when they faced the monster they called "the man-killer" and asked: "What *kind* of labor should man do? Why should there be a division between mental and manual labor?"

Because our activity in that momentous strike — activity that encompassed both the actual strike and the deep philosophic probing before, during and after those events — was crucial in the birth of the philosophy of Marxist-Humanism, this is both the story of the strike itself and the organizational story of the roots of the new form of organization that became News and Letters Committees.

The two are inseparable. "A Missing Page from American Labor History" is written by Andy Phillips and other direct participants in the strike; "The Emergence of a New Movement from Practice that Is Itself a Form of Theory" is written by Raya Dunayevskaya, chairwoman of News and Letters Committees, who was a philosopher-activist in those events.

This story of the first Automation strike in American history speaks eloquently to the workers today who are looking for new forms with which to struggle against both the corporations and today's pitiful crop of labor bureaucrats with their endless concessions.

The impulse for this pamphlet was born when Raya Dunayevskaya began her Marx Centenary tour with a lecture at West Virginia University, which linked Marx's American roots directly to West Virginia in his hailing of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry as "the signal" that had been given for a whole new epoch — *and* Marxist-Humanism's roots directly to the 1949-50 Miners' General Strike which had pointed to a whole new movement from practice to theory which is itself a form of theory. The intense response to that page of history, unknown even to those living right where it was made, convinced us that this story needs finally to be recorded.

THE NATIONAL EDITORIAL BOARD
News and Letters Committees

A Missing Page from American Labor History

by Andy Phillips

My excitement began to rise the day before I started to work in the mines, when I went to the company store to buy my mining boots, heavy leather miner's belt, hard cap and lunch bucket. It mounted during the next day as I dressed to go to work, travelled to the mine, got my miner's lamp, joined other miners in the man-trip that would take us to our work section, and then entered the mine.

This was mid-June, 1948, afternoon shift, at Consolidation Coal Company's Pursglove #15 mine in Scott's Run in northern West Virginia. Mining machinery then was track-mounted, requiring the laying of a network of steel rails underground to produce the coal. There were about 14 of us on a section: the loading machine operator and helper, the cutting machine operator and helper, a mechanic, a shot fireman, two trackmen, two timbermen, a motorman and his helper called a snapper, a spillage man and the boss.

Production followed a cycle. The cutting machine crew first went into a "place," or room. Mounted on the front of the cutting machine was a large steel bar nine feet long, a foot and a half wide and several inches thick, and around which rotated a steel belt holding steel bits jutting out to rip into the coal. Setting the machine and maneuvering the cutting bar into position at the top of the roof, the cutter started the cutting bit chain and moved the machine forward until the bar was fully sumped into the coal. After cutting a 16-foot-wide swath across the top, and another down the side, the cutter and his helper drilled three spaced holes near the bottom.

The timber crew followed, shoring up the top with two wooden bars, each measuring about eight feet by 12 feet by 16 feet long. One end was placed in a side niche cut at the top by the cutter, with the other end supported by a post cut by the timber crew to fit. Next came the shotfireman, who loaded the three holes and dynamited the coal to break it up for the loading crew. The loading machine, with two rotating claw-like arms, scooped up the coal into a built-in conveyor belt that carried it back over a boom to be dumped into empty coal cars handled by the motorman and snapper, who shuttled loaded cars into a side track and returned with empties to be filled. When the cut was loaded out, the trackmen laid rails up to the face of the coal to advance the production process, and the spillage man cleaned up loose coal and applied rock dust, a white chemical powder used to reduce the danger of coal dust explosions. When they finished, the cycle began again with the cutting crew.

My first shift, worked as a timberman, required first shouldering then carrying the bars from 50 to 300 feet and setting them in place against the top. By 10:00 that night, my exhaustion was total and my shoulders raw and bleeding, despite the fact that my buddy, as the evening wore on, helped lighten my load by moving up toward the center of the bar to take most of the weight. Even so, without the help of the shotfireman, who did my bar carrying for the last hour, I never would have been able to finish that first shift. Dragging myself home that night, the first thing I did was to sew thick pads into the shoulders of my work shirt. Without that, I'd never have made it through the second

night — even though I'd surprised the guys on my crew by showing up at all. Most were convinced I wouldn't be back after the first day, since they knew I was a college student.

Despite having been born and raised in the region and coming from a working class family, and even though I could never have afforded college without going under the GI Bill, my being a student loomed large in the minds of the miners. I soon learned why. College students in the mines during the summer months were there for one of two reasons: for the relatively high wages (that miners had fought so hard to gain), or for "practical" experience as coal engineering students on their way to high-paying jobs with the company. In either case, they almost always ignored the miners' warnings to refuse dangerous practices ordered by the bosses who took advantage of the students' ignorance. The life and death matters often involved, coupled with the students' attitude of arrogant superiority, bred a healthy miner distrust toward them.

At this point in the summer of 1948, there was no way of knowing the full range of objective and subjective forces that were coming together and would explode in the 1949-50 strike of the nation's half-million hard and soft coal miners that eventually focused on northern West Virginia. But much was known about the history of the coal miners, whose militant struggles, and victories, had earned for them the well-deserved designation as "the shock troops of American labor." The United Mine Workers had actually gone out on strike during the height of World War II in 1943, and challenged the government's threats to draft them into the army and to take over the mines, with their declarations of "You can't dig coal with bayonets!" and "Let the senators dig coal!" During that '43 strike, there were such heated discussions among the GIs that some who were from the coal regions of Pennsylvania and West Virginia decided to return to work in the mines after the war. Following the end of the war, the miners were again on labor's front lines as a near general strike swept the nation.

It was against this background that some servicemen, returning home radicalized by both the war and the continuous labor struggles, coalesced with several revolutionary intellectuals in northern West Virginia. They became the core of a most unusual branch of the Socialist Workers Party, in that all of them held the minority position of the Johnson-Forest Tendency (Forest was the name Raya Dunayevskaya used in the Socialist Workers Party, and Johnson the name used by C.L.R. James), which had developed the theory that Russia, far from being a workers' state, was a state-capitalist society that they opposed. The group originally comprised an intellectual from the coal area and his wife, a radical youth from Detroit, and two who have helped in writing this pamphlet — Frank, an army veteran who had lost his leg in Germany, and Raymond, a navy veteran who had been born and raised in a mining community in southwest Pennsylvania. Here is how Raymond summed up that experience: "I came out of World War II very anti-war. It was the war that made me decide what I wanted to do. I'd had four years of it and I never wanted to see a war again. I came out of the Great Depression, and was pretty much against this system."

The miners responded to the work of the young group, but among the most responsive were the Blacks — both miners and women. They persistently brought together their friends and neighbors to participate in meetings where we discussed what we all could do together to fight against racial discrimination in the community as well as the oppression in the mines.



Rockdust sprayed on mine section helps prevent spread of coal dust explosion.

Within a year, the group both established a periphery among the miners and attracted several students attending West Virginia University in Morgantown. The latter, in addition to myself, included an ex-miner and two others from the southern part of the state, and two ex-servicemen from the Morgantown area. Two in the group who worked briefly in the mines were fired for their open activities, leaving two of us in the mines in the fall of 1948.

Then, on November 16, a local dust explosion blasted through my section where I was working as a spillage man. My recollection is that of standing with the two trackmen about 90 feet back from the coal face around a corner, waiting for the shot fireman to set off his final shot in a cut that was coming through near where we were working.

My next remembrance was of twisting my head aside to escape the choking fumes of smelling salts held under my nose. Voices buzzed around me, and upon first opening my eyes, pinpoints of light slowly appeared that were from miners' cap lamps.

Blinking my eyes to clear my vision, I saw the guys on my section circled around me, where I sat propped up against the rib of our section's dinner hole. Huddled over my hands and arms folded in my lap, I looked down and saw nothing but a mass of tiny coal dust particles. My boots, trousers, shirt and hands looked like I had been dipped and rolled in a pile of very fine coal dust, and I became vaguely aware of drops of blood dripping from my face onto my lap, like a slowly dripping faucet. Looking at my right hand, I could see the fleshy tip of my index finger hanging loosely by the skin, with the bare



Miners grab quick lunch in underground dinner hole.

bone sticking out. It all seemed strange, because I felt very little pain, and yet knew I'd been hurt.

"Can you move your right arm?" one of the men asked. I nodded and raised my right arm, bending and straightening it out. "How about your left arm?" questioned another. I tried to move my left arm, but couldn't, and felt a sharp pain.

I had no idea then what had happened. But as I later discovered, the day shift boss and engineer were responsible for the explosion. They had failed to accurately chart how much coal had been mined in a cross cut that had advanced behind the face of the heading where the trackmen and I had been working. So when that last shot was fired, it blew out into our heading, setting off the dust explosion.

Coal dust, much more powerful than gunpowder when exploded, sets off a chain reaction of such tremendous force that it can twist steel rails like pretzels. Timed at speeds over 50,000 miles an hour, coal dust explosions will feed on any loose coal that exists or can be stirred up into the air. That's why it's so important to clean up all loose coal, to have plenty of water on a machine to keep the dust down, and to apply rock dust heavily to reduce the danger of spreading an explosion. Without these precautions, a simple spark can send a dust explosion blasting through an entire mine.¹

1. The lack of these safety measures caused the March 25, 1947 Centralia, Illinois mine explosion that killed 111 miners and eventually resulted in the passing of the first federal Mine Safety Act.

All of us on that section were lucky to be alive, and especially the two trackmen and myself. If the three of us hadn't been back around that corner, we'd have been blown to bits by the direct force of the explosion. As it was, one of the trackmen suffered a broken collar bone and a banged-up right shoulder that prevented him from ever being able to raise his right arm above his head. The other had a few cracked ribs, but recovered pretty well. I got the worst of it. As explained to me later, the force of the blast hurled me about 60 feet from where I had been standing, crumpling me in a heap against the rib. The guys on my section thought I was a piece of dirty old canvas that had been thrown aside, and passed by me a half dozen times before they finally found me. I wound up with a crushed elbow, a broken left arm and right hand, plus assorted cuts and bruises.

For the next year and a half, I would be in and out of the hospital for four operations. But in between, at times with casts on both my arms, I was able to participate throughout the historic 1949-50 strike.

STRIKE PRELUDE

As John L. Lewis, president of the UMWA, evaluated his action strategy for 1949, his confrontations with President Harry Truman, the courts and the coal operators during the previous two years weighed oppressively on him. The post-World War II national strike wave spawned the Taft-Hartley Act, which was passed by Congress in 1947 to curb organized labor's power, and contained a major provision that established an 80-day "cooling off" period for strikes that supposedly posed a "national emergency."

Following in their long-established tradition of "No Contract, No Work," the miners' 1947 strike brought swift action by Truman under the Taft-Hartley Act. Federal Judge T. Alan Goldsboro threw Lewis into jail and fined the union over \$3 million. In 1948, although Lewis did not call a strike, he and the union were nevertheless fined \$1,450,000 by Judge Goldsboro, and again under the provisions of the Act, this time for Lewis' refusal to negotiate with Joseph Moody, president of the Southern Coal Producers Association and a bitter opponent of the UMWA.

As the 1949 battle lines were being drawn, on the negative side loomed an 80-day stockpile of coal; a hostile President, Congress, courts and press; the potent Taft-Hartley Act; four separate coal operator negotiating groups; and a fragmented national labor leadership that had surrendered the workers to the Taft-Hartley Act by accepting its provisions — against the advice and leadership of Lewis who had urged non-compliance. On the positive side stood Lewis with his unparalleled knowledge of the industry and grasp of the coal contract; the UMWA's long experience in challenging the power of presidents, operators and courts; and, above all, a disciplined rank-and-file that had forged a proud tradition of working class solidarity and victory in battle.

Under the Taft-Hartley Act, either Lewis or the coal operators were required to give a 60-day notice of intent to terminate the contract, which was due to expire on June 30. That expiration date thus established April 30 as the deadline for giving notice of termination.

Lewis had other plans, however, and fired his opening guns a month and a half before that deadline, the middle of March, when he proclaimed a two-week Memorial Period to protest President Truman's appointment of a known enemy of the miners, James Boyd,



John L. Lewis, UMWA President, at Labor Day Rally in 1950.

as U.S. Director of Mines. Though furious, neither the operators nor the government could do little more than fume, since the contract contained the Memorial provision. The two-week work stoppage put a dent in the coal stockpile.

At this time Lewis also began to leak his contract demands, which included a 6-hour day, 5-day work week and doubling from 20¢ to 40¢ the royalty from each ton of union coal mined to be paid into the UMWA Health and Welfare Fund, under which miners and their families received health and pension benefits. The four negotiating groups arrayed against the miners were the Southern Coal Producers Association (SCPA), the combined northern and western group, the captive mine operators (the mines owned and operated by the steel companies to produce steel), and the anthracite, or hard coal, operators.

Although the labor leaders had acquiesced to the Taft-Hartley Act, its use against the miners revealed its full destructive power with frightening clarity, and mobilized mass rank-and-file labor opposition to the law. Moreover, in November 1948, Truman had won his stunning presidential election victory over Republican candidate Tom Dewey, due in part to Truman's campaign pledge to repeal the Taft-Hartley Act. And, in spring 1949, Congress seemed ready to repeal the law.

Moody, aware that Lewis and the UMWA would escape the Act's punitive provisions upon repeal, acted quickly, on April 21, serving the contract termination notice of

the SCPA. He thus made sure that Lewis and the miners would still be disciplined by the Act if Lewis again refused to negotiate with him. Sidestepping this challenge, Lewis instead sent UMWA Vice-president John Owens to negotiate with the SCPA. He thus avoided the Taft-Hartley Act, and at the same time let Moody and the SCPA know the negotiations were meaningless, since everyone recognized that no agreement was possible without Lewis.

THE CONTINUOUS MINER

The national attention centered on this maneuvering notwithstanding, the April 30 "deadline" for contract termination notice came and went — without a word from either Lewis or the operators.

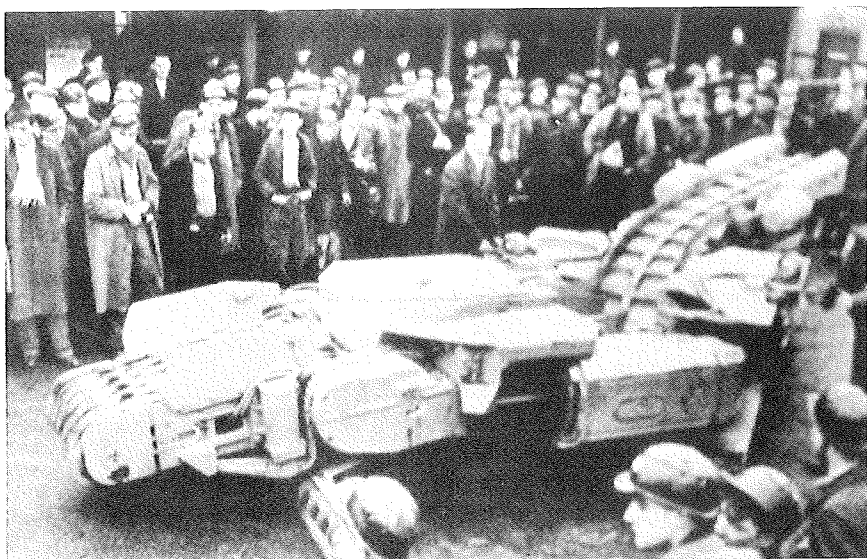
Then, on May 6, two seemingly unrelated events took place. One was a wildcat strike of the 62,000 Ford Rouge auto workers protesting a production speedup at the huge Detroit plant. The other was a front page report in the *Fairmont Times*, a daily paper in northern West Virginia. The report, along with five large photos, dealt with the first continuous miner, placed in operation at Bethlehem Steel's Carolina-Idamay captive mine in Marion County. The reporter, specially invited to observe and describe this new coal mining method, vividly detailed how the \$50,000 caterpillar-mounted machine ripped into the coal face, devouring tons with one sweep of a wide drum, or head, on which were mounted a series of rotating chains fitted with bits that ground out the coal that was conveyed back and dumped into a huge rubber-tired, electrically powered buggy that rapidly shuttled between the continuous miner and an inside conveyor dumping point.

Most shocking, however, was the report that the continuous miner section required a crew of only four workers: the continuous miner operator, his helper, the buggy man —and the boss. Needing less than one-third of the number of miners employed on a traditional mining section, the continuous miner clearly spelled economic disaster to the coal miners and their families unless some protective measures were taken.

As jolting as the report was, it did not touch on the nightmarish reality of the working conditions or the deadly danger created by the continuous miner. Under the traditional mining process, work crews followed each other, and by working harder to catch up, or when a machine broke down, had a chance to rest. And since a boss could be in only one place at a time, he could not watch all of the miners all of the time.

With the continuous miner this all changed. By stationing himself at the machine, the boss could watch everyone for the entire shift. And there was no catching up. They had named the machine well when they called it the continuous miner, because it was truly designed to work without stopping. But more than that were the conditions of work the new method created. With the head ripping into the face, the powerful whirling bits pulverizing the coal conveyed back and dumped into the waiting buggy, fine coal dust quickly saturated the air, making it impossible to see more than a few feet. Water sprinklers vainly tried to keep the dust down.

But that was only part of it. Several running motors on the machine gave off so much heat that the work face became a hot, sweaty, dusty and confining black box. As bad as that was, time-study expertssonn were assigned to eliminate the lost production that resulted



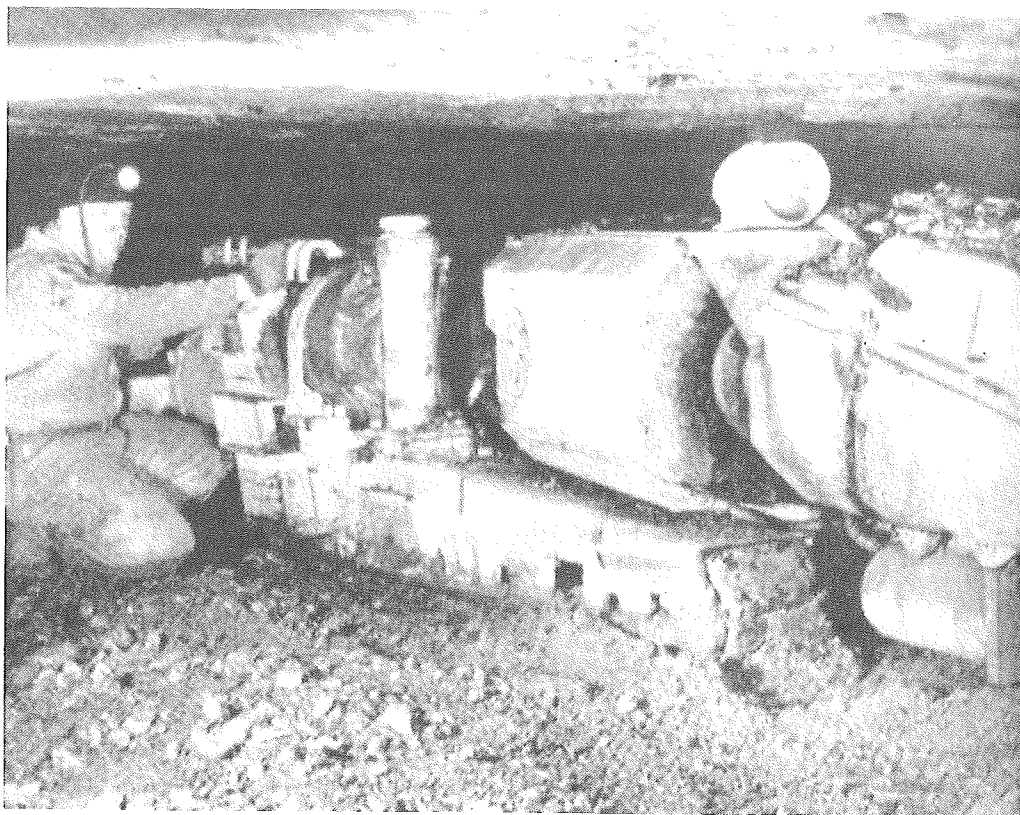
Nightmarish hell of working conditions created by continuous miner was not part of presentations given when this “man-killer” went on display.

when the continuous miner had to wait between the buggy runs to the dumping point. First, a second buggy was added, and then a traditional loading machine was placed behind the continuous miner, allowing it to keep on going until it clawed out a full cut of coal.

The words are hard to find that can fully describe what this did to the work face. Here you have the continuous miner, ripping the coal out and spewing it back over the conveyor boom as it swung back and forth until the coal was piled from rib to rib and to the top, virtually entombing the work crew in a confined area where the dust and heat were multiplied many times over. With all the motors running and in an atmosphere super-laden with fine coal dust, a single spark from anything — the grinding bits hitting a hard sulfur ball, a spark from any motor, a short in any electrical wire — could turn that face into a raging inferno of death-dealing destruction. And that’s precisely what has happened since the continuous miner’s introduction — many times over.

And there’s still more. Explosive methane gas, trapped by nature in the coal seam, is liberated in the mining process. That’s why it’s essential to have adequate air circulating through the mine, to dilute and drive the gas out. A deadly problem arose with the increased rate of coal production with the continuous miner. A mine ventilating system adequate for the traditional mining method fell far short of the needs in continuous mining.

The first continuous miner placed in my mine illustrated this all too dramatically. It was a classic example: the machine moving in too rapidly for the air to drive out the methane gas; the accumulation of an explosive gas mixture; a spark from the rotating bits hitting a sulfur ball; a searing explosion with five miners horribly burned and scarred for life. Miraculously, none were killed in that one.



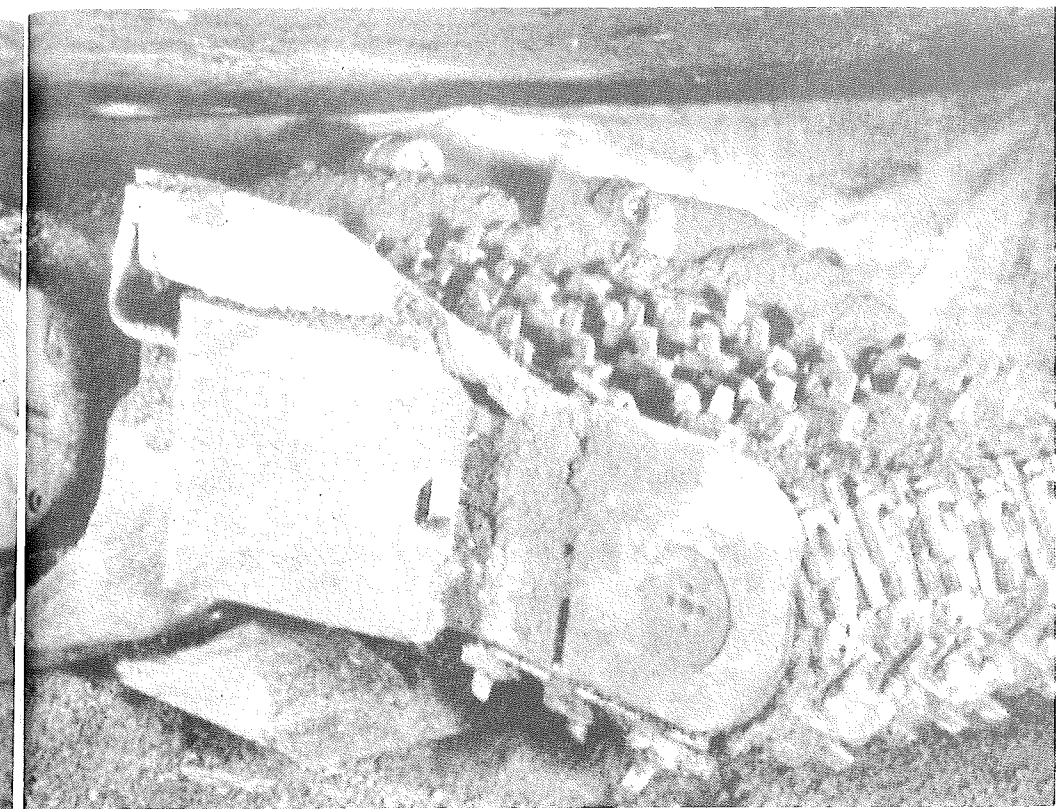
Continuous miner in action underground.

Engineers of the continuous miner had warned of its inherent dangers, emphasizing that no human being should be subjected to the threatening production conditions and punishing pace of the machine, and that immediate remedial steps had to be taken to reduce the human toll the machine would otherwise exact from the miners. Since that time, billions have been spent to increase the productivity of the machine, but pitifully little to improve the work conditions of the miners. Moreover, even the few remedial measures won over the years from the operators came only after the miners struck to back up demands for safer conditions.

Lewis, however, had always supported new coal production technology, and the miners knew they could not look to him to oppose the continuous miner. They remembered Lewis' declaration that he wouldn't care if the UMWA got down to 25,000 members, they would still be the most highly paid workers in the country.

THE STRIKE BEGINS

And wages and fringe benefits were indeed on Lewis' mind as he sparred with the coal operators and government. On May 28, the government made a move, with the Na-



tional Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruling that the closed union-shop contract clause negotiated between Lewis and the captive mine owners the previous year was illegal under the Taft-Hartley Act. Here there was a real Catch-22: under Taft-Hartley, a union shop could be approved only by a NLRB-conducted vote of the union membership . . . but since Lewis had refused, on principle, to sign the Taft-Hartley anti-Communist affidavit, the UMWA was ineligible to use NLRB services.

In response to the NLRB ruling, Lewis called the coal miners out for a week on June 7, in what he called "a brief stabilizing period of inaction." Threats again poured from the operators and government, but they could do nothing since the walkout posed no emergency. And while the work stoppage slightly depleted the coal stockpile, the reserve remained at an 80-day level. Lewis sent the miners back to work for a week, until June 21, the beginning of the miners' annual two-week vacation, and during which time the UMWA contract would expire — on June 30.

Everyone waited to see if Lewis would follow the historic tradition of "No Contract, No Work" — despite the fact that he had ignored the formal contract termination notice required under the Taft-Hartley Act. No one would have been surprised if he had openly challenged the Act, which all knew he fiercely opposed.

Instead of doing that, however, he stunned the nation with his declaration that miners would work a three-day week. Though he sent all miners back to work when the vacation ended on July 5, those east of the Mississippi River — the very large majority of the coal miners in the U.S. — were ordered to work a three-day week. The authority for this action, Lewis asserted, derived from still another contract clause that stated the miners were required to work only when "willing and able." And none doubted that Lewis would decide when they would be willing and able. It was masterful maneuvering, but the fact remained that Lewis had violated the "No Contract, No Work" principle.

Most of the miners were primed to strike to uphold their "No Contract, No Work" tradition. However, though disappointed, they obeyed Lewis.

In the meantime, the contract between the United Steel Workers union and the steel companies had expired on June 15, but USW President Philip Murray delayed a strike call to permit Federal Mediator Cyrus Ching to try to work out a compromise. Lewis, convinced there could be no UMWA contract agreement with the captive mine owners without a steel settlement, sparred all summer with the coal operator groups, rejecting their contract demands and having his own rejected.

At mid-September, Lewis suddenly announced the suspension of all payments from the UMWA Health and Welfare Fund, charging that the coal operators were refusing to make their royalty payments, and reporting that the Fund's resources had been slashed from \$100 million to \$14 million. On September 19, the largest captive mine in West Virginia, Barrackville, and the state's largest commercial mine, Grant Town, both in northern West Virginia, called local union meetings and voted to strike until the Fund's problems were solved. Almost immediately, union miners in all of northern West Virginia and southwestern Pennsylvania followed suit. This action, orchestrated by UMWA District 31 officers under the leadership of their president, Cecil J. Urbaniak, resulted in a "spontaneous" regional walkout.

Frustrated over the stalemated contract talks and beginning to feel the economic pinch of the three-day work week, the UMWA miners were determined to shut down all mines in the region, including non-union, or scab, operations. Roving pickets mushroomed throughout the area to halt all production and transportation of coal.

Out of the hospital between operations at this point, with my left arm in a cast, I joined the pickets along with Frank, who, while not a miner, did have a car and was permitted to "chauffeur" the pickets. His description of the experience follows:

In the black hours of the morning a number of cars met at a central point. Small clusters of men whispered quietly about the cars. At a given signal, after some 15 to 20 minutes, we moved on to still another point, slowly going south toward the UMWA District headquarters. After some two hours of this stopping and going and picking up of cars, it was broad daylight and the cars numbered over a hundred. They followed closely behind each other and looked like some gigantic snake weaving its way slowly over the tortuous hilly highways of the south.

The men were all in high spirit and the whole thing had less the atmosphere of battle than of a holiday. Some of the men were high; some had brought their clubs or pistols; others joked continually. Finally, all the cars parked near the crest of a hill and all the men poured out.

They milled about, it seemed aimlessly. Suddenly, there were a few yells, a scurry of men toward the highway, a racing coal truck, thrown rocks, squealing tires, and finally curses. When still another truck appeared, the men managed to slow it up, leap on the running board while it was still in motion, and start fighting with the driver. The truck careened and the pickets leaped off. On the side lines some of the miners cheered or cursed, depending on the outcome.

So it went throughout the day: one mine after the other was closed down. They were mostly small, unorganized mines, in predominantly farm country, notoriously anti-union and largely unorganized.

The District officials travelled in a big, shiny car and when especially hilly terrain had to be hiked, they somehow had a jeep to carry them. For me a good deal of it was reminiscent of the army. The District officials carried themselves with the same shame and false humbleness that did the army officers, who had contempt for the men but were fearful of their power when the actual fighting developed. I had trekked over some rough land with the miners to get to one of the mines that was still operating. On the way down, the "officers" and the jeep stopped to pick me up, since I was obviously quite tired of hiking on my crutches. I felt like some wounded soldier being given a lift by a benevolent general.

THE REAL GENERALS

During the summer, "Red," the student and ex-miner from southern West Virginia, got a job in the same mine where I worked, and we were always on the go with the pickets. Whereas Frank described the District officials as *acting* like generals, *the real generals directing the action were the rank-and-file miners*. There were always several on every picket line who knew the particular area like a book: where each mine was; how many men worked in each; how much resistance could be expected; if a sheriff and deputies would be there to challenge us; if the mine owner was cooperative or hostile; if the scab (non-union) miners were armed; and how many pickets would be required to handle a particular mine.

Usually, only a few pickets were needed. Most scab operators, knowing from past experience the perils of challenging angry union miners, would call their miners out and send them home, telling them not to return until the strike ended. But there were other responses, hostile ones, and I vividly remember the first time I faced a string of double-barreled shotguns. It was at one particular scab mine that had a reputation for being troublesome, and when we got to it, a sheriff and three deputies blocked our way with sawed-off double-barreled shotguns leveled at us. And what they say is true: when you're staring right into it, that barrel does look more like a cannon than a shotgun.

We walked slowly forward until the guns were inches away from our chests. Our picket leader told the sheriff that we weren't looking for trouble, but that we sure were going to get those scabs out of that mine.

The sheriff, shouting that we were all on mine company property and in his county that meant unlawful trespassing, threatened to arrest all of us if we did not leave immediately. Our picket captain looked the sheriff in the eye and told him to "Shut up!" — loud and clear. The sheriff threatened to shoot, and our picket captain taunted, "Go ahead. Pull the trigger. You can't miss. I'm standing right in front of you."



Armed guards, called “yellow dogs” by union miners and hired to protect scab (non-union) operations, were no match for roving miner picket lines that shut down all coal production during 1949-50 strike.

Surrounded by over 200 miners with gun butts jutting out of their waistbands, the sheriff and his deputies began to show signs of nervousness. Everyone knew the sheriff was bluffing, simply because if he had dared to shoot, he and his deputies would have been riddled to pieces. The higher law in that confrontation clearly lay with the miners.

Now it was the sheriff saying he didn't want any trouble, that he was only trying to do his job. It was all over. The sheriff called the scab operator out of the mine, who in turn called out his scab miners. The operator, known for his lying deceit, got a special warning that if he dared to work his mine and we had to come back, there would be no mine left for him to operate. And he knew we meant it.

The strike spread throughout the whole of Appalachia — West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama and Ohio — with western miners also walking out to make the walkout total. In Virginia, Governor William Tuck ordered a state com-

mission to run the state's mines, giving public notice that he intended to keep the scab mines operating there. These kinds of challenges kept the press wires humming with reports of dynamited coal tipples, blown up railroad tracks, strafed scab coal trucks and wounded scabs and pickets as the strike fury escalated.

On September 30, Lewis ordered Pennsylvania's 78,000 hard coal miners back to work, along with the 22,000 soft coal miners west of the Mississippi, but said nothing to the nearly 400,000 out in the eastern soft coal fields.

And the next day, October 1, USW President Murray called a steel strike following the collapse of mediation talks with management. This marked the first time in American labor history that both coal and steel were on strike at the same time, with a total of over 900,000 workers walking off their jobs. At this point, Lewis proposed to AFL President William Green and CIO President Murray that they combine forces to set up a \$2.5 million strike fund to support the workers, but Green rejected the idea, killing the plan.

At the end of October, after the steel workers were on strike for a month, Bethlehem Steel settled with the steelworkers union, marking the beginning of the end of that strike. During the summer and fall months, auto workers at Ford, Chrysler and GM also struck to win their contracts. The unbroken waves of strike actions that swept the nation revived new fears of a general strike, and effectively stalled the efforts to repeal the Taft-Hartley Act.

The impasse in coal dragged on, and on November 10 Lewis ordered the eastern miners back to their three-day work week after they had been out 52 days. Jockeying continued throughout November and December between Lewis, the operators and Truman, but nothing happened to show even a hint of progress in the on-again, off-again talks, while the miners and their families continued to go deeper in debt.

By the time the new year rolled around, the impatient miners faced increasingly difficult conditions. Local relief agencies had been organized to aid the miners. A combination church-recreation-community center called The Shack, located in the heart of the Scott's Run mining area comprising more than a dozen mines and mining communities, was administered by Reverend Richard Smith of the Presbyterian ministry, who also headed the Scott's Run area relief effort. Most of the aid came from local business solicitations, and government surplus food consisting primarily of cheese, powdered milk and powdered eggs.

A TURNING POINT

The first week in January 1950, Consolidation Coal Co. brought court action against the UMWA in Ohio, demanding an injunction against the three-day work week and payment for lost production. Lewis promptly called out the miners in six Consol mines in the Morgantown-Fairmont area on Monday, January 9 . . . only to have most of the other area miners spontaneously walk out as well.

The scope of this unexpected and independent wildcat strike brought a quick reaction from Lewis, who, on Wednesday, January 11, dispatched the following telegram to UMWA District President Urbaniak: "Will you please transmit to our members who are idle this week my suggestion that they resume production next Monday." This time, however, something totally new developed. Instead of complying with Lewis' "suggestion," a meeting of some 300 area local union officers was called for Thursday, January 12 at the large

Grant Town local union hall. The officers at the meeting voted to reject Lewis' order to return to work, announced they would hold their own local union meetings over the weekend for their members to vote on the situation, and scheduled another meeting at the Grant Town hall for the next Sunday, January 15, to report their local union decisions.

District officials, increasingly alarmed at this unauthorized work stoppage, were out in force at the week-end local meetings, to urge, plead or demand for a return to work. At the local union level, they were partly successful, for at the Sunday Grant Town meeting, chaired by Grant Town local President Joe Serdich, the tally from the local unions disclosed that 19 had voted to return to work, with 13 voting to stay out.

The hall was jammed with rank-and-file miners vehemently opposed to going back to work and eager to express their feelings. Unlike some local union meetings, such as my own where our local union bureaucrats had contacted members they knew were in favor of returning to work to be present and support the District representatives who attacked those of us who spoke up to stay out, the atmosphere in the Grant Town hall raged with strike fever.

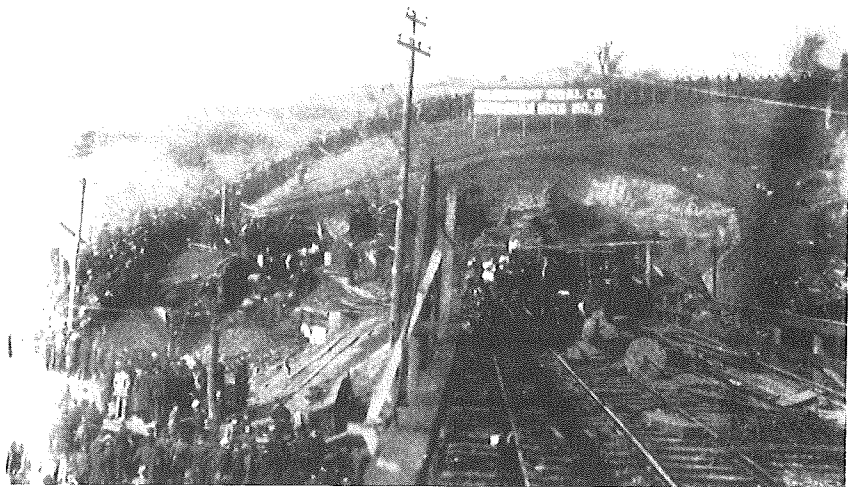
"We've followed Lewis and the District too long already," one miner bellowed. "I've lost everything I got, just like a lot of you guys in this hall. But I'll be damned and go to hell before I go back to work now, and I'm ready to send anyone else to hell who tries to go back before we get what we want!"

"We've been hangin' by our thumbs for over six months now," another declared, "and we're no closer to a settlement now than we were six months ago. Now it's up to us. I know we can do it, you know we can do it, and we all know it's gonna take all of us to do it if it's gonna get done at all!"

The roars of approval from the rank-and-file that shook the hall when the miners spoke to stay out, and the sharp opposition to those in favor of going back to work, including District officials who were overwhelmingly repudiated, left no doubt in anyone's mind what the course of action would be. The adjournment of the meeting signalled a mobilization of rank-and-file members who volunteered to go to picket mines where the vote had favored a return to work, knowing that the coal companies had scheduled work on that same Sunday midnight shift to try to break the solidity of the miners and stop the expansion of the strike.

As noted, the coal miners have a long and fierce tradition of working class solidarity, marked especially by never crossing a picket line. To miners, a picket line is two workers. And whether there are 10 or 10,000 miners involved, if two pickets appear at a mine, nobody goes in to work. And it was the confidence of the rank-and-file in the strength of their own great tradition that proved to be vital. Despite the fact that District officials also showed up at the mines to try to force miners who might be there to cross the picket lines, not a single mine worked. Every picket line was honored. In a number of cases, miners went to their own mines to make sure no one went to work.

Monday, the day Lewis had ordered us to go back to work, came and went. Not only did we stay out, we began to spread the strike. Urbaniak, desperately trying to regain control, called a 2:30 p.m. meeting for the following Thursday, January 19, at a large local union hall in nearby Monongah. He warned that only invited local union officers would be permitted to attend, knowing full well he could not control the rank-and-file.



Nation's most horrifying mine explosion, on December 7, 1907, killed 361 miners at Monongah mine in northern West Virginia. Fittingly, this small town was site of mass meeting where, on January 19, 1950, rank-and-file miners seized complete control of the general coal strike.

However, long before noon on Thursday, a wave of rank-and-file miners began to descend on the hall, with some 1,800 jamming it to confront Urbaniak when he got there. Stunned by this total transformation of what he had planned, Urbaniak futilely ordered a roll call of the "invited" union officers at 2 p.m., despite the fact he had called the meeting for 2:30. Not only was this useless, it exposed how desperate the District officers were and how far they would go to try to crush the burgeoning strike movement.

There had been a number of mass meetings before this one, of course, but never had I been at such a huge mass meeting with so many angry rank-and-file miners. They were furious with Urbaniak. But when UMWA International representative Rinaldo Cappellini, sent by Lewis from the union's Washington, D.C. headquarters to try to bulldoze the men back into line, dared to call the strike leaders "self-styled Hitlers," the miners erupted with such fury that Urbaniak leaped to the microphone to plead with the miners not to harm the now quaking Cappellini.

Whatever illusions Urbaniak may have had about regaining control evaporated as miner after miner re-affirmed the determination to spread the strike throughout the country and to stay out "until hell froze over" if that's what it took to win their contract. Cappellini could now take that message back to Lewis, along with the report of the incredibly scathing attacks against Lewis. Many old timers at the meeting said that it was the first time in their memory that they had ever heard Lewis so loudly booed when his name was mentioned.

The turning point, begun at the Sunday Grant Town meeting, reached irrevocable completion at the Thursday Monongah meeting. The rank-and-file were now in control of the strike.

The wildcat strike spread across the nation. Lewis sent telegrams ordering the miners back to work; Truman threatened to use the Taft-Hartley Act again; and finally Lewis and the operators announced re-opening of contract negotiations. With this announcement, Lewis sent another telegram ordering the miners back to work. This was the telegram with the supposed special word signals — that “this time” Lewis really did want the miners to return to work. The press, unable to accept the idea that the rank-and-file possessed the capability of leading the strike in opposition to Lewis, had speculated that Lewis used special code words in his telegrams to “really” let the miners know his true wishes.

Ending this speculation, the miners called another meeting at the Grant Town union hall on January 28 to re-affirm their decision to stay out. They pointed out that it had been their strike actions that had forced the operators to the bargaining table, and further stated that they would just wait and see what happened in the contract talks before deciding what they’d do. The talks stalled and the miners remained on strike.

President Truman, charging that the refusal of the miners to return to work had created a national emergency, threw the Taft-Hartley Act against Lewis and the UMWA on February 7. This not only legally blocked the UMWA from giving any aid to the miners (actually, the miners were getting nothing from UMWA at this point), it also halted the meager relief program at The Shack. Reverend Smith announced that all aid had been cut off because the miners, now under the Taft-Hartley injunction, were engaged in an illegal strike action.

When Truman threw the Taft-Hartley Act at us, we faced a very critical situation. We knew all too well the destructive power of the law as it had been used against both Lewis and the UMWA, and we had to find a way to stay out without opening ourselves or the union to lawsuits.

As Taft-Hartley was interpreted, if the union, or Lewis as head of the UMWA, or any subdivision of the union, gave us so much as a dime to help us, or tried to influence us to stay out, the union could be fined for contempt of court. In addition, if any miner tried to influence any other miner, or miners, to stay out of work, either by word or deed, that miner could also be liable to a contempt charge.

And as soon as Truman invoked the act, we knew that Lewis would be sending another telegram to all local unions, this one ordering the membership to go back to work under penalty of the law. He thus cleared himself of any court charge by having complied with the legal requirements of the act.

But we discovered the legal fact that it is against the Constitution of the U.S. for a law to be passed against an *individual*. And in that fact we found our answer, and we got that answer to every rank-and-filer and union officer throughout the coal fields.

When the local union meetings were called to read Lewis’ back-to-work telegram, they lasted about five minutes. The designated local union officer read the telegram, which was followed by a simple statement: “We have all heard the telegram. I can’t tell you what to do, but they can’t pass a law against an individual. You can do what you want, but I can tell you I’m not going back to work until we have a contract! Meeting is adjourned!”

That’s all there was to it. We were all legally clear of the Taft-Hartley Act — the union, Lewis and all of us.

TWO KINDS OF ATTITUDES TO WORKERS

What emerged in the course of the strike, however, was not just the difference between the rank-and-file and union leaders. What also emerged was the difference in attitudes *within the radical movement*. It came out sharply in the attitude of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) to the "red-baiting" campaign that was launched against us, and to the new type of relief committee proposed at a critical moment of the strike by Raya Dunayevskaya, who had been working closely with us in Morgantown. It was not that the SWP leaders were not opposed to the red-baiting — they were. But instead of rooting themselves in masses in motion, instead of seeing what the workers were doing against the red-baiting, they worried that the Morgantown branch was being "adventuristic."

During the course of the strike, we often requested assistance from the National Office of the SWP, but none was forthcoming. Not only that, their line on the strike itself was so bad that it would have been ruinous for us if we had directly associated ourselves with their paper, *The Militant*. Raymond says of that episode:

We wouldn't distribute *The Militant* when it came out. We said, hell, the miners are going out on strike *against* John L. Lewis and the SWP says we should consider him a great labor leader! The SWP didn't like what we in the Johnson-Forest Tendency were doing in West Virginia, not from the start. They called us "adventurers," and we always heard accusations of "small mass partyism" being thrown at us. All through the strike the SWP continued to put out material saying how great John L. Lewis was.

Here is how he described our own kind of activities:

Our group at the university must have written hundreds of letters to every labor organization in the eastern and mid-west U.S. trying to get their support for the strike. We got some response and collected some money this way.

Then we got the idea to picket a basketball game at the campus, the most important basketball game of the year, against Pittsburgh. This wasn't such a common thing to do at the time since the university was run by the mine operators. They were on its board of trustees; they ran the place. At that time the school was mostly upper class or upper middle class. But there were a lot of veterans coming onto the campus who were a real breath of fresh air.

So we set up this picket line at the basketball game in order to collect money and inform students of the strike. This was our way of breaking down the division between mental and manual, between "hardhats" and students.

We kept the picket line up all through the game and collected quite a bit of money.

At the same time, nothing better shows the different direction we were taking than our attitude toward the women. Whereas others stressed their hardships and suffering, except for the bourgeois press, which always tried to find a woman to quote who was "opposed" to the strike, Raya Dunayevskaya was sending articles like this to *The Militant*:

A trip to northern West Virginia, seat of some of the most militant mass picketing of the just-concluded mine strike, reveals that the miners' wives played an important role. This is one of the many facets of the successful mine struggle that the



Huge turnout of miners and their families marked 1950 Labor Day Rally in Kanawha in southern West Virginia, reflecting spirit of solidarity that won 1949-50 strike.

local press dealt with sketchily and the national capitalist press not at all. The most that could be gleaned from the big dailies, was that the wives were "taking" the long fight and empty food baskets because they had no choice. In truth, however, the role they played was not a passive but an active one. Here are but a few incidents.

It seems that the union had permitted pumpers and a few other maintenance men to work for the Pursglove Coal Co. during the strike. The women took a different attitude. They threw up two picket lines, one blocking the road and the other the bridge leading to the tipple. They let only the foremen through. This action on the part of 50 women who took matters into their own hands not only stopped the maintenance men but quickly led the company to "reconsider" its decision to try to have maintenance men.

In Charleston, W. Va., the women joined the picket line of their men. The snobbery of the owner's son particularly aroused their anger. The women pickets stripped his shirt and jabbed hatpins into his shoulders. The "roughing up" of the scion of wealth led to arrests but did not stop the women from continuing with their picketing.

The women also took an active role on the question of miners' relief. While the miners appealed to other labor bodies, the wives went door to door in their own and surrounding communities and then they helped decorate the hall, meet delegations of UAW and other workers who had displayed their labor solidarity by contributing to miners' relief, and aided in the distribution of the food to the most needy families.

Precisely because the role of the women was an active one it was inevitable that it should lead to organization. In Beckley, W. Va., the women decided to back up their husbands in the fight for a contract by organizing themselves into a Women's Auxiliary. They formed this organization "to help miners at all times, particularly during strikes." Mrs. Haynes Hayworth, wife of the treasurer of the UMWA local at Amigo, and organizer of this women's auxiliary, was asked what the wives would do if their husbands decided to go back to work without a contract.

"Then," she answered quickly, "they'd have to do the housework too. They will have to build fires, cook their own food, wash their own clothes, clean the house and hire baby sitters to take care of the children while they are in the mines."

But there was never any question at all — except in the minds of capitalist reporters — of the miners returning to work without a contract. The miners themselves not only fought against the coal barons, they also welcomed the action of their wives. One miner said: "Our wives are right. We can't work on empty stomachs. And we won't work without a contract."

These actions on the part of the women will be sure to leave their mark on the community as a whole.

THE MINERS' RELIEF COMMITTEE

But what truly became a transition point for the strike was the rank-and-file Miners Relief Committee. With all established avenues of aid dried up or cut off, the top priority became relief, massive relief to help feed the miners and keep the operators from starving us into defeat. Raya, from her vantage point of being there, was able to gauge both the mood and needs of the miners and their families. Moreover, she also knew that workers in other industries were in complete sympathy with the miners and were very anxious to help. Her position was clear and simple — and revolutionary: have the miners go to other workers, but especially to those areas where other State-Capitalist Tendency (Johnson-Forest) members could help.

"Red" and I talked about the idea of a miners' relief committee to other officers and rank-and-file miners at a meeting in Scott's Run on February 14. A motion was passed to notify all locals to send delegates to another meeting that Thursday to organize the committee. When we met to discuss our plans, District officials suddenly burst into the hall, yelling about a miner who had been shot that afternoon on a picket line. They told us to forget about the committee and to start rounding up pickets to be out in full force at that mine the next morning. I'm sure they were trying to use the excuse of the miner being shot to break up our meeting before we could take any action.

But "Red," who had been unanimously elected as chairman of the committee, kept the meeting on course. Replying to the District officers that we certainly would be at the mine the next morning, he pointed out that it would only take a minute to do what the meeting had been called for: to approve a relief committee and appoint committee members to go out and get the aid from other workers throughout the country. This was done, and the Grant Town officers volunteered their local's post office box number as the official mailing address of the committee.

The following week, two miners headed East to Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York, and two others went West into Ohio and Michigan. All were totally committed to



Defiant miners spill out of meeting hall in Brownsville, Pennsylvania, following rejection of UMWA President John L. Lewis' demand that they



return to work and end the national wildcat strike that rank-and-file miners were directing.

winning the strike, and no more effective speakers could have been sent out to do the job. One of them had been arrested for unlawful picketing and was under a court order prohibiting him from leaving the county. He fearlessly proclaimed his contempt for that law to every group of workers that he spoke to, not only in impassioned appeals for aid, but most powerfully and eloquently by his actual presence, in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Michigan.

During this period, the local press and company miner stooges tried to whip up an anti-red hysteria, accusing the strike leaders of being Communists or dupes of Communists, and charging that reds and outside agitators were infiltrating and taking over the leadership of the strike. "Red" and I had faced such charges, of course, but rank-and-file miners always came to our defense, and often exposed our accusers to be opposition union bureaucrats or company stool pigeons.

We had been caught in the cold war, anti-red atmosphere that had been nationally orchestrated by the press and administration for over a year. The sensationalism included the strident reporting of the Chambers-Hiss trial; the nationwide purge of leftists from the organized labor movement, especially in the UAW, CIO, and United Electrical Workers Union; as well as the media attention on the Chinese Revolution that was nearing victory under the leadership of Mao Zedong, with the national press corps demanding to know "Who lost China?"

The red-baiting and accusations took a particularly vicious turn when a van of relief collected in New York by a teachers' union, the American Labor Party and the Progressive Party came in to the Barrackville local union. Those who brought the food and clothing also came with movie cameras and lights to photograph the delivery, and they in turn were photographed and their visit reported in the local press. A militant Black Barrackville miner, Solomon Tate, who had run as an elector on the Progressive Party ticket in 1948, and who had been instrumental in getting the relief, came in for special press condemnation. The reports always linked Tate's Progressive Party affiliation to the fact that he was a chief coordinator of the food distribution at the local, and that many Blacks accepted the relief. The implication was clear that the Black families, and especially Tate, were somehow un-American for accepting the "red" food.

A flow of newspaper articles and editorials hit out at the Barrackville local union's president and other officers for permitting "red" food to be distributed at the local union hall. The drumbeat of press attacks became so vicious that many local union presidents publicly denounced the acceptance of any "red" food, some even declaring that "red" food sent to their locals should be dumped into the river.

TRI-STATE MEETING

Instead of intensifying their activity, the SWP at this point became worried about Raya's judgment and where the red-baiting might lead. The National Office called for a Tri-State Meeting of SWP union activists in Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia to be held in Youngstown on February 26. The stated reason was to get a full report on what was happening in the mines and to coordinate regional action, but we all knew it was to discipline us. Five of us attended from Morgantown and Raya acted as Secretary.²

2. Wayne State University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Raya Dunayevskaya Collection, Detroit, Michigan, pp. 1485-91.

“Red” was asked to give the background report and began by establishing:

“Andy and I have put three years in the mines and are accepted as coal miners, not as students. We have had quite a bit of struggle with fighting the local bureaucracy . . .” [Then he recapitulated the story of the strike, from Lewis’s three-day work week to the actual general strike to the situation at that moment:] “The miners are getting hungry. Credit (at the local company store) was cut off and restored. They are out in the cold, starving, and there is no state relief in West Virginia. We thought it was time to start a relief committee . . . We called a mass meeting of the officers of these locals. They felt it would be a wonderful thing. The activity thus far has been sending out correspondence to labor weeklies in the U.S. — there are 145 — asking them to call union meetings and send relief to this area. This particular move was sanctioned by the District, but we were told to ‘be sure to steer clear of red locals.’ Their (the District’s) hands are tied and they can’t legally go out and solicit help. The work must be done by rank-and-file miners and on an individual basis . . . Then this committee decided to send out two miners to contact other unions. We contacted Freddie (Raya) in Pittsburgh who contacted Sam in Youngstown, and when the two miners got there they got a good reception. They called to say they had \$501 and were going to Akron and Detroit . . .”

Frank dealt with the red-baiting: “When we started this committee, the local newspaper columnist, who has a labor column and his own committee, The Democratic Labor Committee, was called up and told about it. Immediately he became suspicious and wrote a column saying the ‘miners must be very careful where they get help.’ Following this the Republican paper congratulated the Democratic labor columnist who continued to write about ‘Trotskyists’ and their activities.”

Frank also reported the letters from and to the SWP office in New York: “The first letter we got urged us to be cautious. Then came a second letter, *before* they got our letters showing we had secured the District support for the relief committee, in which they said, ‘We told you to be cautious and now . . .’ But that was before they knew we got this support.”

Although the SWP leaders at this Tri-State Meeting insisted that any “attempt to generalize” the opposition of the rank-and-file miners to Lewis “into a ‘revolt’ would be dangerous,” and that “we would be overhasty if we tried to equate the Lewis bureaucracy with the others, say in the steel union” — nevertheless, by the end of the meeting they concluded that “the Morgantown comrades have done one of the finest jobs of any of our trade union fractions . . . And now in getting the relief issue and getting the backing of the district, they have seized the center of the problem . . . The important thing is now to get aid from steel and other unions and to make a success of this venture . . .”

We continued to expand our work with the relief committee. The SWP did prove helpful, since many of their members working in rubber, steel, auto and other industries did help to arrange local union meetings for the miners to speak. Everywhere, the worker responses were immediate, and funds began to stream in to the committee. But it was Detroit which proved most important of all, because there the miners met two auto-worker members of the State-Capitalist Tendency who were instrumental in mobilizing what became a city-wide relief program to help the miners, with the giant Ford Local 600 spearheading

the effort. Food and clothing to fill five huge trailer trucks were donated by the workers and others, including students, who contributed generously to the appeal.

Nothing could better describe the impact of that caravan than the way Raya did it for *The Militant*:

Pursglove, W. Va.—March 6—There was jubilation in Pursglove today. Willis Massey, chairman of the Miners Relief Committee, got word from Tommy Thompson, president of UAW Local 600, that a food caravan from Detroit auto workers was on its way to West Virginia miners. Immediately Massey, "Happy" Conduck, Joe Kuhn and their wives left to intercept the food truck at Washington, Pa. and escort it into West Virginia.

At the same time other UMW members began to decorate Dallas Hall to welcome this food relief from their fellow workers. The West Virginia University Students for Miners Relief offered to paint the signs. These were ready when the caravan arrived, and read: "Welcome Food Caravan", "United Labor Can Lick the Taft-Hartley Law", "UMW and UAW Fight Together", "UMW District 31 Miners Greet Brother Thompson, President UAW Local 600". Meanwhile, word spread quickly in "The Run" and 100 miners and their wives filed into the hall.

Tommy Thompson had to return to Detroit immediately but three UAW Committeemen, Archie Occacia, Hoe Hogan and William Hood remained to celebrate with the miners.

When the meeting was called to order, the miners decided to honor the auto workers, by electing one of them, William Hood, to act as chairman of their meeting. The first to speak was Archie Occacia. He spoke of labor solidarity "not only of the miners and the auto workers, but of the whole CIO and A.F. of L. There is need for the whole laboring class to stick togethewr. If you hurt my brother, you hurt me. If the operators had beaten the UMW it would have destroyed all organized labor since the UMW is the strongest union in our country."

When miners cheered the 12 tons of food that the auto workers had sent, and a check for \$1,000 from UAW Local 600, and another for \$333 from Local 155, Joe Hogan rose to say that the auto workers didn't come "to get thanks from the miners, but to *give* thanks to the miners for their splendid fight" which was not only in behalf of themselves but helped the whole labor movement.

The spirit of labor solidarity rode high and finally Willis Massey rose to thank the auto workers and to say what he as a miner felt won the fight. He distinguished between "institutional and spiritual union". "It is true," he continued, "that the treasury, the building and all worldly goods that the union possesses could be confiscated by a Taft-Hartley Government. But what they cannot confiscate is our spiritual union. And that is because the spirit of unionism and labor solidarity is not only in us as a group but is in every individual miner. What is in the soul of every miner no one can take away, no one can break." He closed by stressing the labor solidarity evident here in the help of the auto workers. "Our victory shows what can be done when we fight together."

The audience cheered. The morale of these miners who had just won their contract fight against the operators was raised higher by the display of labor solidarity. They cheered the representatives of the auto workers, and took them on a tour of the mining community. There were no bands and no fanfare, just a simple showing of worker to worker of where and how he lives and of the why of their constant

struggle against the greedy operators. The auto workers will have a story to take back to their fellow workers in Detroit which will further cement the labor unity of the two great bodies of organized labor.

Our Miners Relief Committee came under the protection of the rank-and-file miners, and especially those who went out to speak to workers' meetings in other areas. They defended the committee and accused our attackers of being against the miners and their struggle that depended on simple survival. We had brought in more aid than all the other groups combined. We were so successful that the others, who had been smearing us with the "red" brush, were eager for us to "join" them.

Our relief committee, in operation for only two weeks, got over \$6,000 in cash contributions from workers in other industries, plus the relief truck caravan. The relief pipeline was open. The operators and government were not going to starve us into submission.

The coal operators capitulated; Federal Judge Raymond Keetch, hearing the government's Taft-Hartley case against Lewis and the UMW, ruled in favor of Lewis and the union; and on March 3, 1950, the contract was signed. We got a 70-cent daily wage increase and 10-cents-per-ton more in the Welfare Fund. Lewis gave up the "willing and able" clause and accepted a five-day yearly limit on the Memorial Period.

THE STRIKE'S HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE

The gulf separating Lewis from the rank-and-file is seen not only in the difference between what Lewis settled for and what the miners wanted, but also by the continuation of the 1949-50 strike in the wildcat strike that erupted in the next year, 1951, when the miners in northern West Virginia demanded comprehensive seniority rights. While the miners had one of the oldest unions in the nation, they had never had seniority protection in their contract.

What the miners feared came true immediately: the continuous miner ushered in thousands of layoffs. Miners with as little as a week on the job were kept working, while others with as much as 30-40 years were fired. As Raymond put it: "We didn't know at that time that Appalachia would be formed into a depression area from this. But people wanted the seniority system to have the right to get *off* this machine, not to get on it, because they were young people and it was a man-killer. And so the new strike broke out."

That wildcat strike centered on Consol's 13 mines in northern West Virginia, but quickly threatened to spread as miners from other areas began to plead for us to come and pull them out because they faced the same situation. So intense were the feelings of those of us on strike that we forced Lewis and Consol to negotiate a seniority protection clause without first going back to work. This was the first time a provision was won between national contract negotiations while workers were still on strike. Always before, the company demanded, under law and the contract, that we first go back to work before any agreement could be reached.

Lewis and the operators had clearly understood the revolutionary implications in the 1949-50 rank-and-file movement. That became the last great strike Lewis ever led, and never again did he directly involve the rank-and-file in any contract negotiations. All subse-

quent contract talks were held in secrecy, and we first learned of new agreements when they were reported in the newspapers. Lewis made his peace with the coal operators by giving them the green light on automation — the continuous miner. Within 10 years, from 1950 to 1960, the nation's miners were slashed from 500,000 to less than 175,000. The whole of Appalachia became a permanently depressed region for two decades.

The historic significance of the 1949-50 strike, however, was not only that the miners had revealed in the course of the strike that they were far ahead of their leaders — even such an able and militant leader as Lewis certainly had been. They had also demonstrated that to achieve their ends they had to create their own organization — the mass meeting. They had made their own decisions, carried them out in opposition to the power of the government, coal operators, a hostile press and their own union leadership, and at the same time had directly involved broad segments of the working class in the nation. To some, many of the things the miners did seemed spontaneous, as though the actions came from nowhere. Just the opposite is true. The spontaneity of the miners flowed from their own repeated collective thought and action that preceded their “spontaneous” activity.

But the 1949-50 events also demonstrated that actual concrete activity in thought as well as in practice proves that philosophy is not merely subjective, but objective. The over-riding importance of philosophy was that *out of* the strike was born the passion for working out what the strike meant. It wasn't a question only of the rank-and-file not accepting Lewis, but a question of the rank-and-file looking for a whole new direction. The miners, the first in basic industry to face the inhumanity of Automation in the form of the continuous miner, and acting on the thought which they alone possessed because of the concrete position they occupied, showed mass reason at work in history. The kind of questions they were asking about “What kind of labor should human beings do?” is what they wanted answered.

The story of the historic significance of the 1949-50 Miners' General Strike does not end here, then, but begins anew with the development of the new philosophic categories that were created under the impact of these events and that gave birth to Marxist-Humanism.

The Emergence of a New Movement from Practice that Is Itself a Form of Theory

by Raya Dunayevskaya

The dialectic of the 1949-50 Miners' General Strike, as it was transformed from a Lewis-authorized strike that already had lasted some six months into a challenge to John L. Lewis himself, laid the ground for new ways of thinking. The historic rejection by the miners of Lewis' order to return to work had imbued the old slogan, "No Contract, No Work," with new meaning because of the totally new question the miners raised: "What *kind* of labor should man do?" In a word, by being concerned not just with the unemployment that is always caused by new machinery, but with the unbridgeable gulf between manual and mental labor, which the continuous miner widened, they were pointing to new directions. I had for some years been developing the theory of state-capitalism, and to me the Miners' General Strike seemed to touch, at one and the same time, a concept Marx had designated as alienated labor *and* the absolute opposite to it, which Marx had spelled out as the end of the division between mental and manual labor.

Indeed, the todayness of Marxism shone through brilliantly in the miners' attitude to a passage I had read to them from Marx on the "automaton": "The lightening of the labor, even, becomes a sort of torture since the machine does not free the laborer from work, but deprives the work of all interest . . ." Even the fact that the miners did not know that this passage was from Marx created a translucence when they insisted that the man who wrote that must have been in their mine, it was so perfect a description of Automation, specifically their continuous miner which they called a "man-killer."

It led me to conclude that two new vantage points were needed for the book I had been working on, titled *State-Capitalism and Marxism*.³ One was that the American worker should become a point of departure not only as "root" of Marxism but as a presence today. I therefore proposed to my co-leaders in the Johnson-Forest Tendency (JFT) — C.L.R. James and Grace Lee — that a worker be present at future discussions of the drafts of the book. The second vantage point was to be the dialectic as Lenin interpreted it in his Abstract of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. Four months before the strike erupted, I had finished the first-ever English translation of that historic 1914 encounter of Lenin with Hegel and, with brief comments, had transmitted it to James and Lee. A three-way cor-

3. This first version of what was to become *Marxism and Freedom* was submitted to Oxford University Press in 1947. I then sent it to Prof. Joan Robinson. (The outline I sent her with her critique noted on it is included in the Wayne State University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Raya Dunayevskaya Collection, pp. 472-503.) It was the year that I first visited West Virginia with the aim of establishing a new local there of miners and students. The following year (on my return from France, where I presented my state-capitalist position in a debate with Ernest Mandel before a conference of the Fourth International), I moved to Pittsburgh so I could work with both steel workers in Pittsburgh and miners in West Virginia.

respondence resulted, centered on the relationship of the dialectic to Lenin as well as to our age.⁴

While we seemed to be as one on the need to work out the relationship between objective and subjective for the state-capitalist age that Lenin had worked out for the monopoly stage of capitalism, that relationship between objective and subjective was spoken of only "in general." Now, however, with an ongoing strike in progress, what had been a discussion of ideas assumed, to me, concreteness and urgency. Indeed, it gained a whole new dimension through what the miners were doing and thinking.

On February 14, something quite momentous happened. The workers who had voted down Lewis' order to return to work had been debating what to do next. They were already near starvation. The only relief they were getting came through "charity." Then, on February 14, miners in Scotts Run voted for the motion that "Red" and Andy brought to a meeting to establish a committee of miners to go to the rank-and-file of other unions to ask for help. Clearly, a great deal more than just getting money was involved in that motion. The point was how to do away not only with mere "charity" donations but with dependence on union leaders. Approving this motion signified establishing labor solidarity from below. Three days later, this motion was implemented at an area-wide meeting of local unions.

The miners elected two committees, one to go East and the other West. It was to become the turning point of the whole strike. You have read in Andy Phillips' account how our comrades at the university got the idea of picketing the basketball game. It was their way to try to break down the division between the miners and the students. As one of our comrades put it, looking back to the magnificent caravan of food, clothing and money from the auto and steel rank and file workers: "Let's face it. There was something about the deep philosophic probing that helped get results, and wonder of wonders, it even got the main red-baiter to stop referring to us as 'fly-by-nights, running around town' and to ask people to leave us alone as we were doing a good job."

It was on February 15 — the day after the miners had taken the first action to establish that new Miners' Relief Committee — that James, Lee and I held the first meeting on the book at which a worker was present. (He happened to be the one who would soon arrange the largest meeting in Detroit to raise a caravan of help for the miners.) Here is the way I began my presentation: "Just as the 1945-46 General Strike transformed the abstract Russian Question on property forms into one of actual production relations, so at present the struggle of the miners and the new content they have infused into 'No Contract, No Work' is what gave me the impulse to go into the essential dialectical development of Marx himself."⁵

I then proceeded to trace Marx's own development 1843-73. It made clear Marx's new historic points of departure that occurred in the 1860s. Ever since John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry, Marx had been talking about a new epoch that was dawning, which was sure to bring about a Civil War in the U.S. In discussing how Marx began once more

4. See Appendix A to this pamphlet for a descriptive chronology of 35 letters written between Feb. 18, 1949 and Jan. 15, 1951. The full text of all these letters is included in the Archives collection, pp. 1595-1734.

5. The minutes of this meeting are included in the Archives collection, pp. 1585-1594.

to rework *Capital* in 1865-7, I said: "There is the Jamaican Negro revolt in 1865. There was the Polish revolution, 1863. Then there are the Factory Reports. Marx asks Engels for a pamphlet on Machinery. He works out the average working wage. The whole history now becomes the history of production, not the history of theory." I concluded, "Dialectically, the problem of form is the problem of the contract today."

LENIN'S PHILOSOPHIC NOTEBOOKS

As for the second new vantage point that I proposed for the book — Lenin's *Abstract of Hegel's Science of Logic* — I began this way: "Lenin was, of course, a revolutionary long before he read *Logic*." But, I stressed, he now felt the compulsion to re-evaluate his whole methodology in analyzing subjective as well as objective events. The shocking simultaneity of the war and the collapse of the Second International resulted in a break with his own philosophic past of mechanical materialism. Now Lenin saw in the Hegelian dialectic of negativity the need for a concept of goal, the future that revolutionaries were aiming at. As Lenin put it: "Movement and self-movement . . . Who would believe that this is the core of 'Hegelianism,' of abstract and abstruse (difficult, absurd?) Hegelianism? We must disclose this core, grasp it, save, shell it out, purify it . . ."

As this discussion of Lenin further highlighted his preoccupation with the Doctrine of the Notion — that is, with the subjective as well as the objective paths to liberation — the worker we had invited to the discussion summed it up: "When you don't have a notion of the future, you just counter-pose essence to form. Is that what all this means?" Clearly, the worker's presence at this first meeting on the "Marx book" went a great deal further than "the class question." The worker was grappling with the question of concepts as well as the relationship of subjective to objective.

The new form for the book which I was presenting and the discussion around it, as well as the ongoing strike, convinced me that the ground was now cleared for me to finish the book, which I now began to call "the Lenin Book." However, upon my return to Pittsburgh, I found that the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) was sufficiently worried about the red-baiting taking place and distrustful enough about the West Virginia branch and my activity with them that they called a tri-state meeting of the members from Pittsburgh, West Virginia and Ohio — where they would have a majority. We were confident that we would be vindicated when they heard the miners' own reports.

By the end of that February 26 meeting,⁶ their leader, Harry Braverman, said: "I believe the Morgantown comrades have done one of the finest jobs of any of our trade union fractions. Morgantown has pushed the situation from a local question and made it into a national one, and in extending the strike they also seized upon another basic issue: relief, which is the center of the question now. Everything else is set — the men have determined not to go back to work. And now in getting the relief issue and getting the backing of the district, they have seized the center of the problem again . . . The important thing is now to get aid from steel and other unions and to make a success of this venture . . . Once we act with caution and have mass backing, then we can proceed."

6. See Minutes of Tri-State Meeting included in the Archives collection, pp. 1485-1491.

When Frank asked whether it would be possible for me to come down to West Virginia for several days, permission was quickly granted. This time I was there with the official approval of the SWP. Indeed, the *Militant* published my March 6 report of the jubilation that greeted the arrival of the caravan from the UAW Local 600 workers. You have read it in Andy's report.

One point which concerns the miners' reaction when they came to hear the debate between Harry Braverman and me on the "Russian Question" (which was then going full blast in preparation for the 1950 SWP convention) is important to record although it is not directly related to the strike. As Frank reported the incident: "When the two miners who came up with Andy and me to hear what to them was a very abstract debate, they nevertheless recognized more clearly than we did where it was all going. The conclusion they drew was: 'This means split.' They were happy about it."

What, however, is more important to record, to show why the miners felt so close to us, was that many of the packages sent in the relief caravan contained the name and address of the worker who had sent it and who was asking for correspondence with the miner who received it. One miner summed up the feelings of many when he said: "We have never seen anything like this before. We have never had relief operate this way." It was the rank-and-file to rank-and-file development that likewise opened a new stage in the consequences of this great movement from practice. I was anxious to continue my correspondence with some of the miners and was wondering whether I should not also work out a new essay on coal. Here are the two letters sent out on March 14, one to "Red" and the other to James:

March 14, 1950

Dear J:

My dear Marx is always on the spot. Yes, he was in the very latest mine strike. It now turns out that among the additions in the 1872 edition [of *Capital*] was the transposition of a long footnote on miners into the text itself; you will find it on pp. 541-551. As soon as I get down at least some notes on the literally dozens of books I have read on coal in these past two weeks, I will put it away for a while since there seems to be no chance for an article. Or I may decide to write a rough (very rough first) draft anyway and then just let it lie with you and me in that condition until we get ready to rework. In the meantime I will return to work on *CAPITAL*. (You can keep the minutes as I am being permitted the branch copy; but please do find JB's MS. Will see you get all current material possible.)

Meanwhile some gossip. You noted in the minutes that the initiative for the tri-state discussion was not from P'gh, but from Youngstown where people with higher trade union status of either El or me reside. Frank had to come to town about his leg yesterday and so dropped in and told me that they now have a letter from Youngstown asking "Red" to come down there to speak to the Ohio branches, and P'gh. would be invited too. Naturally he accepted. There is no doubt that both "Red" as a new member and the importance of the strike and relief actions has made Youngstown more than wish it was closer to Morgantown; an actual tie-up that-away is being built up . . .

Back to coal for a minute; I could deal with it either in the context of a full century, 1849-1949 (the first strike and union occurs in U.S. 1849), or restrict myself

to the two WW [World Wars] when all the technological changes occur. The crisis in coal, you know, began in 1924, not 1929. It seems many "friends" of miners as well as the coal barons thought that technology would eliminate the union since it would eliminate that independence of the miner and make him a button pusher even as it did the factory operative who was not organized (1925). The interlude of newness however lasted but a couple of years and the strikes recurred ever more sharply and in fact the initiative comes from the most mechanized mines, as it came in this very latest one. There is no richer mine for Johnsonism than a real mine.

R.

★ ★ ★

March 14, 1950

Dear "Red":

Sorry that I had not gotten a chance to see more of you but of course when the class struggle is active nothing else has precedence. However, the magnificent job you did plus the nearness to the masses just when both a great strike and an independent action such as relief was being accomplished ought not to be allowed to pass without some very precise and elaborate notes of every detail of the action and the reaction for future use. Always, at the end of such an action one finds how much one has grown in stature and experience, and how much more he will know the next time. The point is now not to let it disappear as the past, but to write it down carefully and reexamine later.

No doubt Frank has told you that I am working on a big article on coal. Although I have read literally dozens of books and know the history of miners for a full century, nothing will be as valuable in that article as the actual talks with rank and filers on their specific attitudes. All theory, you know, to Marxists is but the conscious expression of the "instinctive strivings of the proletariat to reconstruct society on Communist beginnings," as Trotsky pointedly put it. Moreover, the workers themselves have been the ones to "invent" new *forms* of organization. Take the Soviets in the good days of Lenin and Trotsky. The workers spontaneously established them and when the great Marxist theoreticians saw them, they said, "That's it" and they made their theories more concrete.

All this is merely to lead up to the necessity to make of theory and practice one, not two separate departments. Hence, when I get a rough draft down in a month or so, I most definitely want you to read it and give me your comments. Also, at some later stage I will want to come down to Morgantown and I hope it will be possible for you to arrange for me to meet some of the miners and talk to them . . .

Do let me know what you think of the idea of the article (perhaps 9,000 words) on coal; what notes you have of the recent experience and in general what comments you have to make.

Comradely,
R.

★ ★ ★

I didn't get to see "Red" then and I gave up the idea of the article on coal as I had to engage in the debates on state-capitalism as the SWP was preparing for its convention. Although the rank-and-file miners who were direct participants when I debated with Harry

Braverman in Pittsburgh correctly predicted split, we didn't actually go through with it then. Just as 1950 was not over when the miners went back to work in March 1950 but re-emerged the next year when they wildcatted over seniority in September 1951, so, though the JFT had not left the SWP when we submitted our document on "State-Capitalism and World Revolution" in August 1950, we did finally leave Trotskyism for good and all in August 1951.

BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE JOHNSON-FOREST TENDENCY

The shock was that it was also the beginning of the end of a united Johnson-Forest Tendency. Where I proposed that the first issue of the new paper we planned to issue should be devoted to the new miners' seniority strike, Johnson (James) opposed. He insisted that "our membership and their friends are the only audience I have in mind for the paper . . . If a mighty bubble broke out, 500,000 miners vs. John L. Lewis, and shook the minefields, I would not budge an inch from our program." We then went "underground", publishing only a mimeographed paper until 1953. It was during this period, 1951-52, that I continued my work on both philosophy and the book, writing a 54-page outline⁷ which I developed on the basis of the Feb. 15, 1950 meeting.

The differences that developed between Forest and Johnson occurred, after all, in a most critical period both internationally and nationally — 1950-1953. The Korean War and McCarthyism were raging and the death of Stalin brought it to a climax.

The death of Stalin lifted an incubus from my brain, and it was inconceivable to me that it wouldn't do that for the Russian and East European workers. I looked forward to great explosions. Charles Denby (the Black production worker who was to become editor of *News & Letters* when finally the break between me and Johnson occurred) called as soon as his shift ended to tell me of the excitement in his factory as the radio blared the news of Stalin's death. Each worker was saying that he had just the person to take Stalin's place — his foreman. I asked Denby to come over for a discussion.

When he came over we spent several hours talking about both Stalin's death and the affinity the American workers felt with the Russian workers, especially on the trade union question. The discussion made it clear to me that, far from the American workers considering this a "Russian Question," they were relating it to their own working conditions in the shop and their relationship to their own bosses and union bureaucrats. Denby asked me whether I remembered the chapter he had written on the UAW in his autobiography,⁸ where he had described the ever-widening gulf between leaders and ranks. The conclusions he had drawn had been intensified by his run-in with those bureaucrats when the rank-and-file miners had come to his local to ask for the auto workers' help during the

7. This second draft of the book which I was then calling "the Lenin book" is included in the Archives collection, pp. 1735-1796.
8. *Indignant Heart* was written under the pen name of Matthew Ward, and was published in 1952. This became Part I of the new edition published in 1978 under the title *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal*, in which Charles Denby included a whole new Part II that began with the events around the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, the year *News & Letters* was born and he became its Black worker-editor.

Miners' General Strike. The miners, too, had learned how crucial it was to deal directly with the rank-and-file, who forced the bureaucrats to triple the amount they had intended to give.

Denby felt the workers he knew would not only understand the problems the Russian workers faced, but that they would find lessons for their own struggles against both the union bureaucrats and the company. He raised the question I had been discussing with him some time before, on the 1920-21 Trade Union debate between Lenin and Trotsky. He said that if I could put that story in the framework of what the workers were experiencing right then, he would be happy to distribute it to his fellow workers and tell me their comments. Outside of the two days it took me to write the political analysis of Stalin's death, I spent the next few weeks writing the essay on that debate, which I called "Then and Now."⁹ I decided also to send it to West Virginia and asked that our comrades there should try to get the reactions of the miners to both Stalin's death and the trade union debate.

Once again I felt the compulsion to return to work on the Hegelian dialectic. What had begun in 1948 with the translation of Lenin's *Philosophic Notebooks*, and continued through 1951,¹⁰ made me go this time directly to the Absolute Idea itself, six weeks before the actual first rebellion from under totalitarianism did erupt in East Germany on June 17, 1953, to be followed very shortly by revolt within Russia itself, in Vorkuta.

In a letter on Hegel's *Science of Logic*, I wrote to Grace on May 12, 1953:¹¹

"I am shaking all over for we have come to *where we part from Lenin*. I mentioned before that although in the *approach* to the Absolute Idea Lenin had mentioned that man's cognition not only reflects the objective world but creates it, *within the chapter* he never developed it." In disagreeing with Lenin for telling us that the last half of the final paragraph of Hegel's *Logic* is unimportant, I argued: "But, my dear Vladimir Ilyitch, it is not true; the end of that page *is* important; we of 1953, we who have lived three decades after you and tried to absorb all you have left us, we can tell you that . . . You didn't have Stalinism to overcome, when transitions, revolutions seemed sufficient to bring the new society. Now everyone looks at the totalitarian one-party state: *that is the new which must be overcome by a totally new revolt in which everyone experiences 'absolute liberation' . . .*"

I concluded the letter of May 12 by insisting that I agreed with Lenin's interpretation of Nature as practice and could see why he was so attracted to it and stopped there, but

9. These articles are both included in the Archives collection, pp. 2180-2199. "Then and Now" appeared in the mimeographed *Correspondence* of April 16, 1953. A greatly edited version of my articles on Stalin's death had appeared in the March 19, 1953 issue and initiated a dispute with Grace Lee who had edited it. It was printed as I wrote it in the issue of April 30, 1953.
10. A letter I wrote to James on June 16, 1951 shows how detailed was my study of Lenin's *Philosophic Notebooks*, in relation both to the specific sections in Hegel that Lenin was commenting on, and to the political repercussions of his study. Because I have just rediscovered it, this letter has not been included in the Archives collection as of this date, and is therefore reproduced here as Appendix B.
11. My "Letters on the Absolute Idea" of May 12 and May 20, 1953 were published along with my translation of Lenin's *Philosophic Notebooks* as the very first publication of News and Letters Committees. They are part of my pamphlet, *Dialectics of Liberation*, available from News & Letters.

that I would continue, as Hegel advised, to the other "sciences" where he first concludes his view of the Absolute, Nature and Mind. The next week, on May 20, I concentrated on the final three Syllogisms of Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind* — paragraphs 575, 576 and 577. Where Para. 575 at once established that practice, too, is "implicitly the Idea," and in Para. 576 Hegel still says "philosophy appears as a subjective cognition," it is only in Para. 577 that the unification of the two — theory and practice, subjective and objective — takes place. And while I was excited enough to then say: "We have entered the new society," the new for our age was the fact that practice, as "implicitly the Idea," meant to me that mass practice is itself a form of theory.

THE BIRTH OF A NEW HUMANISM FOR OUR AGE: MARXISM AND FREEDOM, FROM 1776 UNTIL TODAY

Silence on the part of my co-leader became intolerable once I had written those letters — that is to say, once I had written out all that had been churning in me ever since 1948 and my translation of Lenin's *Abstract of Hegel's Science of Logic*; once I had experienced in the post-World War II period what Lenin had undergone at the simultaneity of World War I and the collapse of the *established* (Second) International; once I had grasped the concept of philosophy as action, as giving action its direction, and the following year had experienced that magnificent Miners' General Strike; once spontaneity appeared in an altogether different form in 1953 in East Germany, where the first revolt ever from under the heel of Stalinism raised the new slogan of "Bread and Freedom."

I tried not just philosophically but concretely to work out what these new movements from practice signified. I didn't fear the "Absolute" once I saw it as so new a unity of theory and practice as to signify *both totality and new beginning*. It was, indeed, this new conception of *the movement from practice that was itself a form of theory* that dictated the form in which I cast the work on which I had been laboring for some ten years. The book I had variously referred to as "Marxism and State-Capitalism," "the Marx book," and "the Lenin book," I now (in 1957, when I was free of Johnsonism and no longer restricted by factionalism) called *Marxism and Freedom, from 1776 Until Today*.

I could then openly dialectically declare: "This book aims to reestablish Marxism in its original form, which Marx called 'a thoroughgoing Naturalism or Humanism.' " Moreover, the Introduction proceeded to explain the new way of writing: "No theoretician, today more than ever before, can write out of his own head. Theory requires a constant shaping and reshaping of ideas on the basis of what the workers themselves are doing and thinking . . . At least, it dictated the method by which this book was written . . . This work is therefore dedicated to the auto workers, miners, steelworkers and student youth who have participated so fully in the writing of this book. They are its co-authors."

So many new voices and revolutionary actions by Blacks, women and youth erupted in the 1960s that the very recording of them led to many new discoveries. Thus, in Mississippi, where the first Freedom Riders filled the jails, a totally new organization called "Woman Power Unlimited" was formed (years before the Women's Liberation Movement of today arose) to bring human comfort to those in the jails and give them a place to stay when they were released.¹² Thus, the Freedom Schools raised a whole new

12. See the *News & Letters* pamphlet, *Freedom Riders Speak for Themselves*, by Mary Hamilton, Louise Inghram, and others, published in 1961.

concept of education which not only made life and learning one, but taught the Northern white youth who had come down to participate in the freedom struggles of the Southern Blacks what history really is: human beings shaping their own destinies.¹³ Thus, "Black is beautiful" was not only an emotional manifestation of pride but the actual history of the U.S. in which Black masses in motion have always been the touchstone.¹⁴

When new developments brought forth a worldwide, massive, anti-war movement, a new generation of revolutionaries, and a whole new Third World, it seemed to many that we were, indeed, on the threshold of revolution. The youth who thought so, however, and who had very nearly dismissed theory as something that can be "picked up en route," found their revolution aborted at the very highest point of action — Paris, May 1968. Activities by themselves are as one-sided as theory by itself. Only in their unity — in a new relationship that is rooted where the action is — can we rise to the challenge of the times.

There did, indeed, arise in the 1970s a search for a philosophy of revolution. It is these new passions and forces that led us to spell out what we had been working on ever since 1953 when we broke through on the Absolute Idea. It was a return to the Hegelian dialectic "in and for itself," as well as working it out for our age. We called it *Philosophy and Revolution, from Hegel to Sartre and from Marx to Mao*. The 200 years since the birth of the machine age, which had been spelled out in *Marxism and Freedom* as a movement from practice, was now spelled out as a movement from theory. What was distinctive was the fact that the last chapter — entitled: "New Passions and New Forces: The Black Dimension, the Anti-Vietnam War Youth, Rank-and-File Labor, Women's Liberation" — was seen as inseparable from the very first chapter: "Absolute Negativity as new Beginning — The Ceaseless Movement of Ideas and of History."

That the movement from practice was, indeed, showing itself to be a form of theory had come to the fore in the 1970s as the Women's Liberation Movement was searching for a decentralized form of organization that would be founded on an organizing *Idea*. It inspired new digging into Rosa Luxemburg's concept of spontaneity and the relationship of Marx's philosophy of revolution to his organizational practice.

The 1970s also saw, for the first time, a transcription of Marx's last writings, his *Ethnological Notebooks*, which disclosed the new moments Marx experienced in the last decade of his life. It was in that decade — 1873-1883 — that Marx spelled out: 1) in his *Ethnological Notebooks*, a new concept of pre-capitalist societies and what he called the Asiatic Mode of Production (which we now refer to as the Third World); 2) in drafts of a letter to Vera Zasulich as well as in a new Preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, the possibility of revolution coming first in the technologically underdeveloped East before the West; 3) in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, the principles of a revolutionary organization that must not be separated from a total philosophy of revolution.

13. See especially "Robert Moses on Education in the South" in the 1965 *News & Letters* pamphlet, *The Free Speech Movement and the Negro Revolution* by Mario Savio, Eugene Walker and Raya Dunayevskaya.
14. The first edition of *American Civilization on Trial* appeared in 1963, three months before the famous civil rights March on Washington led by Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1983, on its 20th anniversary, a new, fourth edition was published by *News & Letters*, expanded to include my essay on "A 1980s View of the Two-Way Road Between the U.S. and Africa."

These so illuminated our state-capitalist age and its total opposite, the new passions and forces for creating a new society, that we rushed to complete our latest theoretical work, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, for the Marx centenary.

Heretofore, Marxists have acted as though Marx had no concept of organization, as though there had been no theory of organization until Lenin. Since the rise of Stalinism had likewise been analyzed as mere bureaucratization rather than as a class transformation of a workers' state into its opposite — a state-capitalist society — no fundamentally new foundation was laid for the next generation of revolutionaries.

What became imperative for revolutionaries in the state-capitalist age was to recognize the *class* nature of state-capitalism and not to limit the discussion of organization to "democracy" vs. "bureaucracy." What was needed was not just a political rejection of the "party to lead" but a whole philosophy of revolution as it related to organization.

In focusing on the last decade of Marx's life, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* challenged all post-Marx Marxists, beginning with Engels, not only on what they couldn't have known (the *Ethnological Notebooks* had not yet been transcribed) but on the separation they all introduced between spontaneity, organization and philosophy.



As Andy Phillips put it at the end of his account of the unfolding of the Miners' General Strike of 1949-50: "To some, many of the things the miners did seemed spontaneous, as though the actions came from nowhere. Just the opposite is true. The spontaneity of the miners flowed from their own repeated collective thought and action that preceded their 'spontaneous' activity." It is long past time that the full story be told, and it must be recorded both as it happened and as the crucial relationship of theory to practice illuminates it.

The impulse to finally record this missing page of American labor history, as the Preface states: "was born when Raya Dunayevskaya began her Marx centenary tour with a lecture at West Virginia University which linked Marx's American roots directly to West Virginia in his hailing of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry as 'the signal' that had been given for a whole new epoch — and Marxist-Humanism's roots directly to the 1949-50 Miners' General Strike which had pointed to a whole new movement from practice to theory which is itself a form of theory."

But that does not tell the whole story. The telling of it today shows that it was in our activities in that historic 1949-50 strike — where our theoretical and practical work were inseparable — that we find the roots of what became the whole body of ideas we call Marxist-Humanism which has been developed over the full 35 year period since. As the News and Letters Committees Perspectives for 1984-85 states:¹⁵

15. All Perspectives Draft Theses of News and Letters Committees have been printed directly in *News & Letters* since 1975. This 1984-85 Thesis appears in the May 1984 issue, and is entitled: "Where are the 1980s Going? The Imperative Need for a Totally New Direction in Uprooting Capitalism-Imperialism."

"Marx's Marxism, from the very beginning of his break with bourgeois society, disclosed that no concept of his was separate from that of permanent revolution — from 1843-1883. Our projection of Marx's Marxism as a totality disclosed that Marx's philosophy of 'revolution in permanence' was ground also for organization, a concept we consider most pertinent for our age."

MARXIST-HUMANIST ARCHIVES

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APPENDIX A

The 35 letters between Raya Dunayevskaya, C. L. R. James and Grace Lee (Boggs), written from February 1949 through January 1951, listed below, are included in the Raya Dunayevskaya Collection of the Wayne State University Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, pp. 1595-1734.

1. Feb. 18, 1949. Dunayevskaya to James, on Lenin's Notebooks on Hegel's *Science of Logic* (Doctrine of Being).
2. Feb. 25, 1949. Dunayevskaya to James, on Lenin's Notebooks on *Logic* (Doctrine of Essence).
3. March 12, 1949. Dunayevskaya to James, on Lenin's Notebooks on *Logic* (Doctrine of Notion).
4. May 14, 1949. Dunayevskaya to James, on "circumstances surrounding" Lenin's Notebooks.
5. May 17, 1949. Dunayevskaya to James, on Lenin and the "actualization of the dialectic proper."
6. May 18, 1949. Dunayevskaya to Lee, on Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.
7. May 20 (?), 1949. James to Lee, on Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and the Philosophic Notebooks.
8. May 27, 1949. Discussion notes: James and Lee.
9. June 8, 1949. Dunayevskaya to James, on Lenin's Notebooks on Imperialism.
10. June 10, 1949. James to Dunayevskaya, first response to the correspondence thus far.
11. June 13, 1949. James to Dunayevskaya, on Lenin's Notebooks and the period 1914-1923.
12. June 19 (?), 1949. James to Lee, on Lenin's method and the method of this correspondence.
13. June 20, 1949. Dunayevskaya to James, on the *Logic*, Marx's *Capital* and the new stage of capitalism (imperialism).
14. June 24, 1949. Dunayevskaya to James, on the article for Marcuse — notes.
15. June 28, 1949. James to Dunayevskaya, on the article for Marcuse — notes (continued).
16. June (?), 1949. James to Dunayevskaya, on abstractions in Lenin's thought.
17. July 2, 1949. James to Lee, on abstractions in Lenin's thought.
18. July 5, 1949. Lee to James, on abstract and concrete in Lenin.
19. July 5, 1949. James to William G., on conversations with Novack and articles in progress.
20. July 6, 1949. Dunayevskaya to James, on Lenin before and after 1914; on monopoly.
21. July 9, 1949. Lee to James, on Lenin and Bukharin; the Taylor system.
22. July 15, 1949. James to Lee, reply to letter on Bukharin.
23. July 20, 1949. Dunayevskaya to James, on Lenin 1914-1917.
24. July 25, 1949. Dunayevskaya to James, on Lenin as "revolutionary dialectician and thinking Kautskyan."
25. July 29, 1949. Lee to James, on Lenin's Notebooks on the *Logic*.
26. August 16, 1949. Lee to James, on Hegel's categories of Universal, Particular and Individual.
27. August 25, 1949. James to "everybody," on Lee's letter of August 16, 1949.
28. August 29, 1949. James to Lee, further comments on Lee's letter of August 16, 1949.
29. August 30, 1949. Dunayevskaya to James, on Lenin's approach to dialectics: 1900-1902; 1914-1916.
30. September 4, 1949. Lee to James, on Hegel's *Logic*: Doctrine of Essence and "the revolt."
31. January 24, 1950. Dunayevskaya to James, on the structure of *Capital*.
32. January 30, 1950. Dunayevskaya to James, on Marx's plans for *Capital*.
33. March 14, 1950. Dunayevskaya to James, on the miners' strike and Marx's writings on coal.
34. June 7, 1950. Dunayevskaya to James, on the structure of *Capital*.
35. January 15, 1951. Dunayevskaya to James, on Vol. III of *Capital*.

APPENDIX B

June 16, 1951

Dear J:

How wonderfully everything is working out for our work on Dialectic! I have just found the letter of Lenin's which places precisely the date of his LEAP . . . Here are the facts:

1) It is true he *began* the study of the Logic while working on the Marx Essay, but

2) The real break came when he reached the Syllogism (Note to Grace: please try to work out pp. 43-50 of Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks in strict relationship to the section of the Logic he is working on. Note that on p. 43 his reference to Plekhanov is still complimentary; then he is through with cause and begins with Subjectivity and 6 short pages thereafter he has all those terrific aphorisms on all Marxists didn't understand, on Plekhanov being a Feuerbachian, etc., etc. I hope you'll have it worked for the session on the book.)

3) Now I find a letter in the Russian Complete Works dated January 4, 1915. It is addressed to the Encyclopedia Granat which has just accepted his Essay and it says: "is it possible still to include some corrections to the part on the dialectic? Perhaps you will drop me a line when precisely it will go to press and when is the final date for presenting corrections. It is precisely with this question that I have been occupied for the last month and a half and I think that I could add something if there were time."

Evidently there was no time. The Encyclopedia had cut out the sections on Socialism and Tactics of the Class Struggle and published. It was published first in its complete form (that is, without the omissions, but with no additions either) in 1925.

Yrs,
R.

